



Texas Hearing Underscores Strong Support for Greater Workplace Enforcement of Immigration Laws

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[Hearing rouses fervor, cheers](#)

By PATRICK McGEE

STAR-TELEGRAM STAFF WRITER

PLANO -- Pledges to toughen enforcement of immigration laws in the workplace won audience enthusiasm Monday during a congressional hearing on the issue at Plano City Hall.

Many of the 200 people who attended the hearing noisily voiced their opposition to illegal immigration.

They scoffed and booed when Bill Beardall, executive director of the Austin-based Equal Justice Center, testified that illegal immigrant workers need the same protection as American workers.

U.S. Rep. John Tierney, D-Mass., received similar treatment when he said workplace enforcement of immigration laws has plummeted under the Bush administration.

Many in the audience held up signs reading, "Secure our Borders," and they cheered when U.S. Rep. Joe Wilson, R-S.C., said, "We can't address illegal immigration without addressing securing the border."

When audience members persisted in shouting their opinions, U.S. Rep. Sam Johnson, R-Plano, the hearing chairman, gently admonished them to keep quiet.

Reports released this year from the Government Accountability Office and the Congressional Research Office say workplace enforcement has become a "relatively low priority" for immigration officials. In 2003, immigration enforcement officials devoted about 4 percent of their time to policing the workplace for illegal immigrants.

But that's changing, said John Chakwin, special agent in charge of the Dallas office of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, who testified at Monday's hearing.

He said ICE could do a better job if it had access to the Social Security Administration's database and could identify workers with Social Security numbers that do not exist or do not match their name.

"We need to drill down and see what companies are the most egregious offenders," he said.

Chakwin said ICE must make requests for specific information, but that the requests go through Social Security Administration headquarters, which can be slow.

In a telephone interview, Social Security spokeswoman Dorothy Clark said current law does not allow the agency to share that information.

Tierney appeared to be concerned about a high error rate in the database, which could cause problems for millions of legal workers if the system became more widely used.

Johnson complained about the error rate, noting that that credit card companies are able to quickly and accurately verify the identity of millions of customers every day.

Business representatives, however, are worried that the United States is running out of workers.

Jon Luther, CEO of Canton, Mass.-based Dunkin Donuts, testified that restaurant owners want to comply with the law, but that they need more workers.

He said the food service industry's need for workers will grow 1 1/2 times faster than demand in the rest of the labor force, while the number of teenagers who work will stay the same.

That means the U.S. government should issue more than 10,000 green cards a year for immigrant workers in the restaurant industry, Luther said.

In an interview after the hearing, Jean Towell, president of the Dallas-based Citizens for Immigration Reform, said she disagrees.

"I think there are Americans who would take those jobs," said Towell, for the anti-immigration group. "Americans are workers, I don't care what they say. Our young people need the jobs."

Dallas Morning News

Emotions are strong at hearing

Verification system on illegal immigrants criticized in Plano

By DIANNE SOLÍS / The Dallas Morning News

PLANO – A U.S. House hearing on illegal immigrants and the bosses who employ them was marked Monday by both applause and hisses from an audience as polarized as Congress.

Proponents of strict laws on immigrant workers held up signs at a hearing led by U.S. Rep. Sam Johnson in Plano.

But there was one point of agreement among those invited to testify before the subcommittee: A voluntary system to verify Social Security numbers is error-ridden.

The hearing, headed by Rep. Sam Johnson, R-Plano, at Plano City Hall, was packed with anti-immigrant activists carrying "Secure Borders" signs. But it also included immigrant supporters and diplomats from the Mexican government.

It was one of more than a dozen such events held around the nation by the House and the Senate. Some view the hearings as a delay tactic by politicians unwilling to compromise on an overhaul of the nation's immigration system before the November elections.

The House passed an enforcement-only bill in December. And this spring, the Senate passed a bill with both enforcement and legalization components. President Bush favors a measure that includes a guest worker program.

The Plano hearing was tightly focused on the employment verification system and proposals to retool it. The subcommittee on Employer and Employee Relations heard testimony from five employers and employment specialists.

Authorities are placing increased scrutiny on the fake document industry that has flourished since 1986, the year of the last sweeping overhaul of the nation's immigration system.

A free, voluntary program called Basic Pilot now allows employers to check Social Security numbers and names with the government's databases. But only about 10,000 of the nation's employers are enrolled.

Last week, the Department of Homeland Security announced an effort to get more employers to participate.

"The error rate under Basic Pilot is very high – regardless of who you talk to," testified Abel Martinez, a lawyer and vice president at San Antonio-based H.E. Butt Grocery Co., which operates the H-E-B and Central Market chains.

Some studies have shown that 10 percent to 20 percent of entries can't be initially verified, he said. He cited another study that showed that as many as a third of Social Security numbers for foreign-born workers come back with problems.

About 5 percent of the nation's workforce is estimated to be here illegally, according to the Pew Hispanic Center.

Social Security officials have noted that numbers sometimes aren't entered properly and surnames change due to divorce, marriage or confusion over the Latin tradition of using two surnames.

Jon L. Luther, chief executive of Dunkin' Brands Inc. of Canton, Mass., testified that the Basic Pilot databases can generate errors. But he said mismatches on numbers and names get cleared up quickly.

Dunkin' Brands requires all franchisees to use Basic Pilot, Mr. Luther said. It franchises the Dunkin' Donuts, Baskin-Robbins and Togo's restaurants brands.

Although Mr. Luther was complimentary of the Department of Homeland Security and its enforcement strategy with Basic Pilot, he added, "Enforcement-only isn't going to work."

Bill Beardall, executive director of the Austin-based Equal Justice Center, testified that documented and undocumented workers have employment rights and protections.

That brought an outburst of "No, no, no" from the audience.

Even before the hearing began, the audience was quick to respond.

That prompted Mr. Johnson – who is up for re-election and whose Democratic opponent, Dan Dodd, was in the audience – to tell the gathering: "Any emotion such as clapping is not allowed in the House. I am going to allow it here."

Cherie Wilkinson, who carried a placard reading "No amnesty," said she would have preferred time at the microphone, too. Illegal immigrants are reducing U.S. living standards, the Wylie homemaker said after the hearing. Employers who hire them get a slap on the wrist, she added.

Mexican diplomats sat quietly at the hearing. The country has much at stake: Mexican immigrants sent home about \$20 billion in U.S. earnings in 2005, and that could climb to \$25 billion in 2006.

After the hearing, Mexican Deputy Consul Hugo Juárez said he hoped for approval of the Kennedy-McCain bill in the Senate, which has more generous provisions for some of the 12 million illegal immigrants in the United States.

Staff writer Isabel Morales of Al Día contributed to this report.

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House Republican Conference Press Office

202a Cannon HOB

(202) 226-9000